DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 193 680 CS 205 949

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TITLE Teaching Students to Write Abstracts.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Annual Workshop on the Teaching of Technical Writing (4th, Carbondale, IL, October 17-18, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Abstracting: Abstracts: *Business Communication: College Students: Higher Education: *Teaching Methods: *Technical Writing: *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A teaching strategy has been developed for showing business and technical writing students how to write abstracts. The strategy contains six steps: (1) explain the importance of abstracts: (2) define summary and descriptive abstracts: (3) give students general guidelines for preparing abstracts: (4) explain topic and sentence outlines, showing the relationship between the two kinds of outlines and the two kinds of abstracts: (5) use an in-class assignment to give students practice writing abstracts: and (6) make appropriate followup assignments. This method of approaching abstracts will give students the basics and prepare them for writing abstracts in professional situations. (RL)

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TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE ABSTRACTS

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Writing abstracts is one of the most difficult components of the report for business and technical writing students to master, especially in basic courses where only two or three weeks can be devoted to the report unit. In this paper I'd like to describe the strategy that I use to teach students to write abstracts and share with you some examples that I've found helpful.

My method for teaching abstracts, briefly, is as follows:

1. Explain the importance of abstracts.
2. Define summary and descriptive abstracts.
3. Give students general guidelines for preparing abstracts.
4. Explain topic and sentence outlines; explain the relationship between the two kinds of outlines and the two kinds of abstracts.
5. Use an in-class assignment to give students practice writing abstracts.
6. Make appropriate follow-up assignments.

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Why Abstracts Are Important

The information explosion continues, making it impossible to keep up with all that is being published in any field. It's been estimated that if a physician were to read all of the medical journals published each month, he or she would have no time at all to practice medicine.

Abstracts are important to a reader for two reasons. First of all, they may make it unnecessary for the reader to go to the original article, if the reader is interested only in the findings or conclusions and not in the supporting data leading to those conclusions. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, an abstract lets the reader know whether reading the article would be time well spent.

Any of our students who will be writing articles for publication, filing for U.S. patents, or writing reports for business and industry must be able to write abstracts to accompany these documents. Our students in technical writing may actually get jobs writing and editing abstracts for services such as Chemical Abstracts. Other students who may not need to write abstracts in the early years of their careers can still benefit from learning how to do so: writing an abstract involves the cognitive abilities of being able to separate major ideas from minor ideas and being

able to discern the logic of an argument. The student who can write an effective abstract can also read and understand an article accurately.

Kinds of Abstracts

There are basically three kinds of abstracts: summary or informative abstracts which contain the logical skeleton of an article; descriptive or indicative abstracts which indicate the topics an article covers and its scope; and hybrid, or combined informative-indicative abstracts which illustrate some aspects of both.

After I've given students these brief definitions, I first show them the following summary abstract taken from our files at the University of Illinois.

STAND UP AND BE HEARD

Maurice A. Broner, Senior Member, IEEE

Summary--Presentations are effective tools to convey ideas. A presentation is either good or bad. A good one leaves a message. A bad one can be effective also, since audiences remember that it was bad long after the message is forgotten. Planned presentations should employ both hearing and sight senses. Controlled tests indicate that people remember ideas longer under these conditions. Presentations should contain these elements: purpose;

background; data generation, assimilation, and analysis; graphics; rehearsal; and delivery.

I next show the following example of a descriptive abstract:

SEMINAR ON WRITING-IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS
FOR ENGINEERS--A REPORT

Charles A. Meyer, Senior Member, IEEE

Summary--This paper reports the significant results of the Seminar on Writing-Improvement Programs for Engineers held in New York City on February 24-25, 1970. It includes an evaluation of the degree of need for better writing by engineers, as well as the specific areas that need attention. It summarizes the major features of various writing-improvement programs described at the seminar, covering both subject content and administration. It concludes with a consensus of the views of both the speakers and the audience at the seminar as to the effectiveness of the training programs described, together with the recommendations developed for future action.

I point out to students that in this descriptive abstract phrases like "this paper reports," "it includes," "it summarizes," and "it concludes" are marks of a descriptive abstract. An additional mark of a descriptive abstract is the fact that we

can't possibly tell what the article's conclusions are from the abstract alone. A summary abstract, in contrast, would tell what the significant results were, how much need there was, what areas needed attention, what the major features of writing-improvement programs were, how effective the speakers and the audience thought training programs are, and what the recommendations were for future action.

After defining the two kinds of abstracts, I show my students several abstracts on transparencies and ask them to define whether they are summary or descriptive. The abstracts I show my students come from Victorian Studies, but obviously you could choose abstracts dealing with any discipline.

Guidelines for Writing Abstracts

Several different style books have guidelines for writing abstracts. I want to be sure that my students get the following information:

1. Make the abstract easy to read.

   a. Use familiar words. If unfamiliar words are necessary, define them.

   b. Avoid jargon.

   c. Use active verbs rather than passive verbs

   d. Use short sentences, but vary sentence structure so that the abstract doesn't sound choppy.

   e. Use complete sentences. Don't omit articles or other little words in an effort to save space.

f. Unless the abstract is very short (100-125 words), divide it into several paragraphs.

2. Be concise.

a. Rephrase ideas from the original document in your own words to condense the meaning into fewer words than the original used.

b. Use standard abbreviations.

c. Give information only once.

3. Be exact and unambiguous. If the article itself is unclear, use exact quotes from the article in quotation marks.

4. Use the same tone and emphasis that the original used. However, it is not necessary to follow the author's organization, wording, or even proportions. The more poorly the original article is written, the more changes you will need to make in the abstract.

5. Organize the information in the way that will be most useful to the reader. Most readers find that a thesis-first abstract is most useful, that is, start with the thesis, conclusion, or findings, then go on to the supporting data or details.

6. Do not comment on or evaluate the article. An abstract should not be confused with a review.

Kinds of Outlines

The next step is to explain topic and sentence outlines. I start by asking my students what a topic outline looks like. As

they give me an answer, I put it up on the board and it usually looks like this.

Figure 1. Topic Outline

I. Main Point

A. Sub-division of I

B. Sub-division of I

II. Main Point

A. Sub-division of II.

1. Sub-division of II.A.

2. Sub-division of II.A.

B. Sub-division of II.

III. Main Point

Of course, it's also possible to use a decimal outline rather than the traditional form using Roman numerals and capital letters. However, what I'm concerned with here is the difference between topic and sentence outlines, so it doesn't matter whether we use a decimal outline or the more traditional form.

I next ask my students what a sentence outline looks like and how it differs from a topic outline. Normally, the only difference they recall is that a sentence outline uses complete sentences, and they give me something like the following:

Figure 2. Sentence Outline (Incomplete Version)

I. Complete Sentence

A. Complete Sentence

B. Complete Sentence

II. Complete Sentence

A. Complete Sentence

1. Complete Sentence

2. Complete Sentence

B. Complete Sentence

III. Complete Sentence

When this is up on the board, I then ask them what's missing. If no one knows the answer, I give them the answer: a thesis sentence. I then expand the incomplete version of the Sentence Outline that they've provided to show them what a complete sentence outline looks like:

Figure 3. Sentence Outline (Full Version)

Thesis Sentence

I. Complete Sentence proving thesis.

A. Complete Sentence proving I.

B. Complete Sentence proving I.

II. Complete Sentence proving thesis.

A. Complete Sentence proving II.

1. Complete sentence proving II.A.

2. Complete sentence proving II.A.

B. Complete sentence proving II.

III. Complete sentence proving thesis.

As they can then see, the sentence outline offers the logical proof of the article. It starts out with the thesis sentence; its Roman numerals are sentences which prove the thesis; capital A's and B's are sentences which prove the Roman numerals. The Arabic 1's and 2's, if the outline has that much subdivision, are points which prove the capital letters. In contrast, in a topic outline, the Roman numerals are simply main points. Their logical relationship to each other or to some larger entity is not specified.

There's another difference between topic and sentence outlines which follows directly from the first difference. Because a sentence outline contains only those points which prove the thesis, normally a sentence outline will have only two or three Roman numerals. A topic outline, in contrast, lists all the main points in an article or report, including the introduction, history of the problem, procedure, etc. Therefore, it is not

unusual for an article to have five or ten Roman numerals in a topic outline. Some of these main points will not be part of the logical proof of the thesis so they will not show up in a sentence outline at all.

The two kinds of outlines are important because they have a direct relationship to the two kinds of abstracts. The topic outline can be used to generate a descriptive abstract since the descriptive abstract lists the topics the article discusses. The sentence outline yields a summary abstract. In fact, if the student has made a good sentence outline of an article or of the report he or she plans to submit, often the only thing necessary to turn the outline into a summary abstract is to provide transitions and put the sentences into paragraphs.

An In-Class Assignment

By this time students will understand the theory behind abstracts. However, I've discovered that students have a good deal of trouble implementing the theory in practice. Therefore, before they have any "real" assignment, on which they'll get a grade, I always give them some practice with an in-class assignment. For several semesters now, I've distributed copies of Carla Butenhoff's article, "Bad Writing Can Be Good Business," The ABCA Bulletin, 40 (June, 1977), 12-13. Although this article is only two pages long, students won't be able to write both

summary and descriptive abstracts of it in one 50-minute period. I therefore divide the students into small groups of two or three students each and ask the groups with stronger students to write a summary abstract, the other groups to write descriptive abstracts. I save about ten minutes at the end of the period to let each group read its abstract and then I give the class immediate oral feedback. This feedback is very important to them so that they understand the style and content required in an abstract.

Follow-up Assignments

After the lecture and in-class assignment, students are ready to do whatever follow-up assignments fit into the rest of your coursework. I first ask my students to write both descriptive and summary abstracts of a short article they've read for class. If you ask them to write abstracts of articles in their field, be sure to ask them to turn in a photocopy of the article as well: you can't grade the abstract unless you've read the original article.

If students are writing a full report for the class, they now also have enough background to write whatever sort of abstract you assign as part of that report.

When I make the out-of-class assignments, I remind them that abstracts in the real world frequently have a rather strict word limit. Abstracts of published articles may often be no more than

125 or 150 words; it's desirable that abstracts for business reports be no more than a page (single spaced). However, when they write an abstract of an article or of their own report, I tell them not to worry about length. Most of our students will not be writing abstracts for academic publishing. If they are writing abstracts of reports in business and industry, the cost of an extra page is rarely crucial. I've found that students frequently have trouble differentiating major information from minor. The experience of cutting an abstract down to a required maximum number of words is a useful academic exercise, but I'm more concerned that they understand the logical structure of the article and reproduce it, even if they provide more supporting information than would normally be required in an abstract.

Conclusion

Obviously this method of teaching abstracts only hits the high points. If you have more time, you could go into differences in style between different kinds of journals; you could stress the fact that the kind of information the author needs to include in the abstract will depend in part upon the audience. For instance, pharmacologists will want to know the composition of the drugs being investigated and how many people or animals were in the experimental series; a company may be less interested in the experimental design and techniques than in the general

feasibility and profitability of producing the product in question. However, this method of approaching abstracts will give students the basics and enable them not only to write the abstracts that we require in our classes, but also to write the abstracts for the article or the report that they may be called on to write on their first job.